

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Is Water a Human Right or a Commodity for Sale?

Last month, I talked about the necessity to manage water very carefully as the quantity and quality of water could very well become our greatest environmental issue. According to the United Nations, 1.1 billion people do not have access to clean water, and the lack of clean water leads directly to a higher incidence of preventable waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery, which kill 2.2 million people per year.

The availability of water in the developed countries has always been a public wealth, but in recent years we have seen cases where it has been privatized. Is this a new trend to dismantle everything owned by the public, like parking lots, skyways and metered parking in Chicago? Privatization of water first hit the news in 2000 when residents of a town in Bolivia revolted against soaring water rates. The Bolivian government granted a 40-year water privatization contract to a consortium jointly owned by an American and an Italian company, and the rates were immediately increased by 200%. As a result, many of the families were paying one-fifth of their income for water.

Privatization doesn't happen just in the developing countries. Privately owned utilities in California, Illinois, Wisconsin and New York charge customers up to 50% more than the publicly owned ones. Prices are set by regulators so that a water company recovers its expense as well as make a little profit. Since the profits are a percentage of expenditures, the private company inflates the cost in order to increase its profit. The private companies argue, however, that the increased cost is due to the ability to measure and treat more contaminants.

The real problem with the publicly owned water utilities is that they operate with an aging infrastructure. One-fifth of the drinking water is lost to leaks, and estimates show that the U.S. will need to spend as much as \$1 trillion by 2019 to make the necessary upgrades. This is a result of a decrease in federal share of spending on the water infrastructure from 78% of the total in 1978 to 3% in 2008.

The water issue will definitely become a bigger concern. As the human population continues to increase and the effects of climate change intensify, the supplies of freshwater are expected to tighten. On top of this, water activists say that private companies have no incentive to conserve water because the more they sell, the more money they make. Even in poor communities, companies have installed prepaid water meters in some neighborhoods. When the allocated water is used up, the company shuts off the water. We are fortunate in the U.S. that we have yet to see anything like prepaid water meters. However, there are cases when utilities cut off water due to customer nonpayment. Water consumption in industrialized countries is as high as 100 gallons per day, while people in the developing countries use as little as eight gallons per capita per day – considered by the United Nations to be enough to meet basic human needs.

While the developing countries are experiencing problems with water availability and relatively high costs, Americans are experiencing something worse – but it is voluntary. I am referring to bottled water, distributed by one of the least-regulated industries in the U.S. The EPA is responsible for tap water oversight and does considerable testing, while bottled water is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA has less than one full-time person in charge of bottled-water oversight. The EPA standards are considerably more stringent than the FDA standards. The argument of the bottlers is that they have helped make a shift from pop to water, not from the tap to bottled water.

We really need to decide whether water is a basic right or a privilege. If water is a privilege and it is based on the ability to pay, there is going to be a large number of people who won't be able to afford that privilege. Are we getting close to this situation? Last month, I mentioned that 36 states are anticipating water shortages by 2013. And California is seriously considering desalination of ocean water to mitigate the impending water shortage. That is not the answer. Just like energy, conservation is the short term solution.